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THE 365-DAY DRESS

Could you wear the same dress every day for a year? Sheena Matheiken is doing exactly that to protest against throwaway fashion and raise money for a cause that's close to her heart **Words** Annemarie Luck

Coco Chanel taught us that the little black dress is the cornerstone of every woman's wardrobe. But how would you feel about the LBD if you had to wear it every day for an entire year? Sheena Matheiken, a thirtysomething creative director at a New York ad agency, has pledged to do exactly that as an exercise in sustainable fashion. However, this fashion philanthropist insists that the daily challenge of reinventing her custom-designed black minidress is the best part of what she's called The Uniform Project. 'The dress is becoming part of my skin,' she says, 'I'm by no means bored of it. It's forcing me to be creative in my dress sense and try out looks I'd never previously imagined.'

And you only have to look at Sheena's website - where she posts a photo of her outfit every day - to see how much fun she has with her versatile black tunic. Created by her friend and fashion designer, Eliza Starbuck, Sheena's 'uniform' is reversible, has deep hidden pockets and buttons down the front so it can be worn open as a sort of jacket too. 'It's a simple yet smart design and it's extremely comfortable,' says Sheena. There are seven identical copies of the dress, one for every day of the week, and Sheena teams them

with recycled, vintage or handmade pieces, many of which are donated by followers of the project as well as on-line stores like Etsy and eBay.

Browsing through Sheena's ensembles - which include accessorizing the dress with a custom-crafted, tiered, silk collar; vintage lace made into suspenders; and an assortment of bright, quirky tights - you wonder how much thought she puts into her look every day. 'I only have about 30 minutes to get ready for work in the morning and I try to keep things as spontaneous as possible. So my outfits vary depending on my mood and what has lately been very unpredictable New York weather!' Still, with the limitations Sheena has placed on her wardrobe, she manages to out-style most of us - and so proves her point: you don't need lots of new clothing to look fabulous.

Sheena kicked off the project on 1 May and her aim is to 'show that style and sustainability needn't be mutually exclusive'; to prove that you needn't be drab to be green. Clearly disapproving of today's culture of throwaway fashion, she says, 'We should be trying to get a full life cycle out of each item of clothing we buy.'

Aside from her fashion statement, Sheena is also raising money for the Akanksha Foundation, a grassroots nonprofit movement that is devoted to bringing education to children living in the slums of India. 'The Indian government spends

about \$360 (R2 730) on one child's school year, but 80 per cent of children drop out before the 10th grade because making wages on the streets to support their families often takes priority over education,' explains Sheena. 'These children work from age four and are the breadwinners... They start begging and stand in line from 6am to get water from the one tap in the village.'

Founded in Mumbai in 1990, 'Akanksha has vowed to match the government's annual spend on every child in the slums to afford them better education, and they work with the families to come up with better ways to support their needs so that the kids can stay in school.' The Uniform Project has already raised over \$14 000 (R105 200), with Sheena and Eliza each adding one dollar a day to the pot.



So how did a girl from New York with no fashion background end up pioneering such an innovative fundraiser? 'Serendipity,' is Sheena's answer as she recalls her journey. Born in Ireland to Indian parents, she moved back to India when she was four. When she finished school she relocated to New York 'in search of an identity that evaded me back home' and studied design and technology. After living in The Big Apple for nearly a decade, Sheena took a six-month sabbatical from work to explore some personal creative projects and think about what she wanted to do next.

'I first had the idea of wearing the same outfit every day for a year purely as a fun challenge for myself. But when I started thinking seriously about the project I decided I wanted to give back to India in some way; I wanted to do something consequential.' The same week that she contacted Akanksha, she discovered that the founder was in New York for a fundraiser so she went along to meet her. The perfect timing persuaded Sheena that it was meant to be.

How Sheena met Eliza, the designer of the little black dress, was another twist of fate: 'We're neighbours, and she saw me on the train. She liked my giraffe socks and I liked her yellow tights. Meeting her was a godsend because I don't have any fashion experience.'

Since the project launched on line, Sheena and Eliza have been caught up in a whirlwind of media attention, blogosphere commentators and clothing donations. Some of the more outlandish items that Sheena has worn include a mermaid's

tail and a necklace crocheted to look like breakfast ingredients.'

With the amount of attention the project has garnered, Sheena and Eliza have begun to think of ways to expand their efforts.

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tail and a necklace crocheted to look like breakfast ingredients. 'The breakfast necklace was hysterical! We actually couldn't refuse it simply because it cracked us up so much,' says Sheena. 'Eliza and I tend to pick out kooky things; we like a bit of drama and it's very important to us to add a sense of humour to the project too - sustainable fashion and philanthropy don't always have to be sombre affairs.'

While Sheena says she has had incredible support from friends, family and internet followers, there are a few critics who complain that her challenge is not wholly sustainable. She is after all being sent clothing from a variety of different sources. One critic went so far as to say, 'This is an overindulgent way of building up her wardrobe and leads to more consumerism.' But Sheena says she enjoys the debate: 'I love that

At the six-month mark Sheena plans to auction off all the accessories she's received so far, and the pair has grand plans to collaborate with other sustainable designers in the future.

And where will the little black dress end up? 'We have gotten hundreds of requests for the dress and are looking for ways that we can make it available to people,' says Sheena. 'It's very exciting to think we could provide the public with their own Uniform dress and we're curious to see if followers will take the idea to heart (and to wardrobe) if we offer them the opportunity to have a 365-day dress of their own.' Which brings us back to our original question: could you wear the same dress every day? ■

To find out more or to donate to the cause visit Theuniformproject.com.

FASHION FAVOURS THE BRAVE Sheena is not the first person to set herself a sartorial challenge...

STYLISH STANCE

In 2005, choreographer and artist Alex Martin wore the same brown dress for 365 days. On her website Littlebrowndress.com Martin describes her project as a 'personal attempt to confront consumerism.'

HIS BLUE JEANS TALK

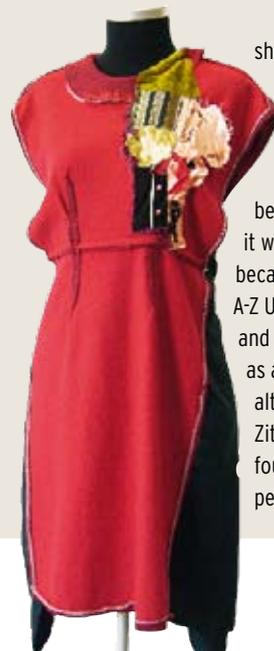
Last year, American photographer Sidney Lo wore the same pair of jeans every day. His project was titled 'What Are You Wearing Today?' and became a visual diary of his denims as they took on a life of their own. Lo's self-portrait series

was exhibited at San Francisco's premiere Japanese denim boutique, Self Edge, in March.

THE ARTFUL DRESSER

In 1991, sculptor and installation artist Andrea Zittel was working at a New York art gallery and was expected to look polished and chic, but with a limited budget

she decided she would wear one self-designed outfit every day for six months before replacing it with another. It became known as the A-Z Uniforms project and it continues today as a form of art, although these days Zittel wears about four or five dresses per season.





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